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As part of our series The Legacy of 9/11 and the "War on Terror", Joost Hiltermann argues that the U.S. invasion of Iraq gave rise to a fierce variety of Sunni Islamist militancy, one just as intent on killing Shiite Muslims as on fighting the U.S. occupation.

Al-Qaeda's Virulent Strain in Iraq

MY FRIEND ARTHUR telephoned me one summer morning in 2003, when I had just returned from Iraq, which had fallen into U.S. hands that April. Arthur was head of the refugee program at the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights. A decade earlier, he and I had travelled together to Iraq, Iran and Turkey to investigate the refugee crisis in the wake of the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Now, he said, he wanted to go to Baghdad for meetings about addressing the new war's human cost. He asked me if he should bring a bulletproof vest. We at Crisis Group had raised the alarm about an incipient insurgency in Iraq, based on my observations during two visits since the U.S. invasion. But the situation in the capital, if chaotic, was still calm relative to what we did not know would soon transpire. I told him a vest would not be imperative.

A month later, Arthur was sitting in the office of the UN special representative, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, when a flatbed truck rumbled into the UN compound at Baghdad's repurposed Canal Hotel, setting off a massive bomb that killed both men as well as twenty others. I try to salve my conscience by thinking a bulletproof vest would not have saved my friend, but I'll never know for sure.

The Canal Hotel suicide bombing was the first such attack in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Responsibility for staging it was claimed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian petty criminal drawn into jihadist circles in prison and to Iraq by the U.S. military occupation, just as fighters from around the Muslim world had flocked to Soviet-occupied Afghanistan a generation earlier. Two years earlier, al-Qaeda had established itself as a global brand with the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., targeting its "far enemy" – Western powers – in spectacular fashion.

The U.S. had responded to the attacks in New York and Washington first by invading Afghanistan, where the ruling Taliban were sheltering Osama bin Laden and his band, and then also Iraq. The connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq was not obvious and, as it turned out, largely non-existent, at least until the U.S. invasion itself attracted would-be jihadists to the country. The particular conditions prevailing in Iraq due to the U.S. invasion, and longstanding tensions between Iraq's religious communities, allowed Zarqawi to build a strong al-Qaeda franchise, one more virulent in its sectarianism than bin Laden's al-Qaeda, and

A car burns outside the UN headquarters at the Canal Hotel after a huge suicide truck bomb explosion rocked the building. Baghdad, Iraq, September 2003. AFP PHOTO/Sabah ARAR

intent on killing Shiites, in particular. Zarqawi deemed the Shiites apostates, a radical notion not commonly held by Iraqi Sunnis at that time. But he was able to rally Sunni support because of many Sunnis' antipathy for Iran and their belief that Shiites had made common cause with Iraq's neighbour during the eight-year war between the two countries in the 1980s.

Within a year, the insurgency that Crisis Group had seen coming was in full swing, aimed primarily at U.S. troops and the nascent Iraqi security forces. But Zarqawi's group, which core al-Qaeda soon disowned for its freelancing and sectarian outlook, took over parts of the insurgency and turned them into something else entirely. By targeting Shiite clerics and houses of worship, as well as crowded marketplaces in predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods, this new al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) plunged the country into a vicious sectarian war. Shiite militias, some backed by Iran, responded to the killings in kind, attacking not just suspected AQI operatives but also the country's Sunni population broadly speaking. The fight might have taken place even without AQI, given the U.S. occupation authority's very public association of Sunnis with Saddam's regime and its labelling of the country's Shiites as oppressed – a narrative that the new ruling Shiite Islamist parties did little to discourage. But AQI was certainly the proverbial match that lit the oil-soaked tinder.

As the sectarian war raged, Iraqi society transformed from diverse to deeply divided, a change first expressed in the way Iraqis defined themselves. Apart from my visits to Iraq, I also attended a number of workshops with Iraqis in Amman, then my home base. Before 2005, these Iraqis, mainly politicians, technocrats and civil society figures, would invariably self-identify as Iraqis; then suddenly they began, as if by invisible hand, referring to themselves and each other as Sunnis and Shiites.

The U.S. killed Zarqawi in a commando operation in 2006; essentially leaderless, AQI did not regain its potency. It did not disappear, either, but survived as insurgencies worldwide often do: hidden in the countryside, popping out only to weaken the authorities' morale through night-time raids on checkpoints, ambushes of patrols on major arteries and sometimes incursions into urban areas. But the

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damage to Iraqi society was done: the sectarian killing went on even without AQI's bloodier operations to goad it, and now with Shiite militias predominant.

Fighting coursed through mixed Sunni/Shiite areas for some three years until the U.S. succeeded in restoring a measure of order through a new military approach – the "surge" – and its marshalling of Sunni tribal groups. These were motivated to fight AQI by the latter's viciousness vis-à-vis those Sunnis who did not bend to its will. In 2012, AQI's remnants fled to a Syria engulfed in civil war to recast themselves as still another new version of al-Qaeda. They soon split from core al-Qaeda more definitively to set up the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), capturing a good part of northern Syria, which they ruled with brutal hand before returning triumphantly to Iraq in May 2014. They then declared the establishment of a new caliphate in the territories they began "liberating" from Baghdad's control – eventually, almost a third of the country.

In short, the U.S. invasion created a monster. Welcomed by many for overthrowing a horrid dictator, U.S. forces and the soon installed Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) quickly made themselves unpopular through their inability (interpreted as unwillingness) to impose security, disbandment of the Iraqi army, sweeping ban of the Baath party, patronage and empowerment of Iraqi exiles, paternalism in governance (which the CPA's incompetence made all the more galling) and disregard for Iraqi governing institutions that had remained functional despite Saddam's regime's violent rule. Even after the CPA dissolved, handing over the reins of power to an interim Iraqi government in 2004, the U.S. presence was hated and actively resisted by those who felt unfairly painted with the broad brush of collaboration with Saddam's regime, a charge of which they deemed themselves innocent. For AQI, it was a perfect environment in which to thrive, capitalising on one group's resentment and grievance.

Over time, Iraqi militants took control of AQI, giving it, and its successor ISIS, a predominantly Iraqi leadership possessing an Iraq-inflected ideology that was based partly in religion (a very narrow, some would say twisted,

Middle East and North Africa Program Director Joost Hiltermann while on a research trip to devastated Sinjar, Iraq, September 2016. CRISIS GROUP/Noah Bonsey

"The U.S. enterprise in Iraq was ill conceived and even more poorly executed."

interpretation of Sunni Islam) and partly in Iraqi Arab chauvinism. Many of the group's top cadres came from the ousted regime's intelligence and security agencies. Today, after its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, the group's remnants are back to playing the long game in a classic insurgency, roaming beyond the view of the authorities and harassing government forces with pinprick attacks in an attempt to rebuild the so-called caliphate's old might.

The fate of AQI and ISIS in Iraq is less relevant than the message their emergence sent. Virulent ideologies and violent actors are all around, but they need the right soil to blossom. Post-invasion Iraq provided it, as have many other war-torn countries and regions since then. Even if the U.S. had pursued a wiser policy focused as much on building a just society as on getting rid of an inconvenient enemy, it might still have struggled to achieve its ends. But despite all its protestations, bringing democracy to Iraq was never its central focus, and AQI rose in the chaos that it created.

The U.S. enterprise in Iraq was ill conceived and even more poorly executed. It allowed for some democratic processes to take hold, but these fell victim to the rampant corruption it also encouraged. I said at the time – and continue to strongly believe – it could never have succeeded, even with substantially more resources, better expertise and greater will. Much as the region's governments cry out for reform, Middle Eastern autocrats will not be enduringly brought down by foreign hands, and especially not through half-baked plans that rely on very selective readings of history, the politicisation of ethnic and religious difference, and the promotion of some groups over others, with no quarter given. These are the easily exploited circumstances in which Zarqawi and his gang arose.

From the perspective of U.S. grand strategy, the Iraq gambit was a gratuitous act of self-harm, even if most Iraqis were deeply relieved to see the old regime gone, and even if many would still not want anything like it to return. It was a false response to the 9/11 attacks, as none of the organisers or perpetrators had any link to Iraq. It was a case of hubris that gave an ambitious jihadist group that had just carried off a dramatic attack on symbols of U.S. power the chance to spawn many would-be imitators, such as Zarqawi and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in the Middle East and beyond. Further, it breathed new life into global jihadism after it lost its safe havens in Afghanistan and was largely on the run.

Following 9/11, the Iraq war became the first accelerator of jihadism, luring many younger people seeking a chance at heroism and martyrdom, as well as community and purpose. The Iraqi case also showed that while grievance played a major role in driving the insurgency – grievance against the U.S. occupation; against the Shiite Islamist parties that took control of the state, shunting the Sunnis aside; and against these parties' principal sponsor, Iran – it took an externally introduced ideology, with its attendant spectacular attacks on selected targets, to provide the fuel that allowed the insurgency to spread and assume its virulently sectarian form.

Incongruously, AQI and, later, ISIS wound up strong enough to lead Iran and the U.S. to converge and sometimes even tacitly cooperate in their separate anti-jihadist efforts. Iran opposed the U.S. military's presence in Iraq but not its help in fighting Sunni jihadists. For its part, the U.S. had been at odds with Iran since the 1979 revolution and the hostage crisis, but still could see benefit from Iran-backed militias upholding the ramshackle new order it had created in Iraq, especially in fighting a tenacious insurgency. It just preferred for these groups to be fully incorporated into, and controlled by, the U.S.-backed central state.

The Iraqi case also shows that jihadists can be their own worst enemy through excess. Their

savagery instils fear but it also alienates potential supporters, if not entire communities, for example when they impose harsh punishments for smoking or force families to give up their daughters in "marriage" to them. It is because of such practices that the U.S. military was able to mobilise the tribal groups that became known as the Awakening Councils or Sons of Iraq. AQI might have been a good deal more effective in winning over the population where it operated if it had moderated its version of Sunni Islamist thought or represented local grievances to attract, indoctrinate, equip and deploy the disaffected. Instead, AQI was the handmaiden of its own undoing. This experience taught some of al-Qaeda's later franchises, such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, to soften their approach to governance, thus burnishing their legitimacy and extending their rule.

Zarqawi died fifteen years ago, but his violent legacy outlives him. It is visible in fragile states and on battlefields throughout the Muslim world, as well as in cities in the West and Russia. Zarqawi did not invent suicide bombings, but he turned them into a routine transnational-jihadist weapon. He mainstreamed the targeting of civilians – an old practice of warfare controversial even within the jihadist milieu – in non-combat settings. And he pioneered the so-called double-tap attacks, setting off a second bomb once the earlier one had drawn first responders and people desperate to find their loved ones.

The notion that no one is safe, that the only rule is that there are no rules, is particularly frightening, including for humanitarian workers who, without a political agenda, seek to bring succour to war's victims. One such person was Gil Loescher, **who died in 2020 at age 75**, a refugee expert who travelled the world to advise the UN. He wrote extensively on the threats his profession has come to face. "In the global war on terror, the line between humanitarian activity and military activity has become blurred", **he warned**.

Loescher knew whereof he spoke. Of the eight people in Vieira de Mello's corner office in the Canal Hotel when the truck bomb exploded, he was the only one to live, though he lost both his legs in the effort to extricate him from the wreckage. Despite his injuries, he continued his work in shaping international policies on refugee issues, including through his writings, thus allowing humanitarian agencies to better address the critical challenges that our increasingly complex world faces, and contributing to a legacy that – perhaps – can outlast Zarqawi's.

[Dedicated to Arthur Helton, St Louis, MO, 1949 – Baghdad, 2003]